The Commissioner

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Contents

The Warning....1
The Stranger at the Inn....8
Dinner....14
The Tour....19
Deeper Ties....26
The Lovers and the Ledger....31
Looming Truth....36
Chaos....43
The Real Commissioner....48
The Mirror....52

The Warning

The windows of the town office hadn’t been cleaned since the spring of 1897. Dust clung to every ledge like the last layer of dignity in the room. Yellowed maps curled at the corners. A portrait of the emperor hung crooked, one side sagging as if tired of watching over the farce below. The air was heavy with smoke from pipes that had long ceased to carry tobacco and now smoldered with damp leaves or rolled-up scraps of stolen report paper.

Mayor Ivan Mirov sat at the center of the long table, his belly pressed against its edge, fingers tapping against a stack of hollow ledgers. His eyes shifted from one face to another — the judge who wore a velvet robe over stained trousers, the hospital warden with wine on his breath, the school director with chalk under his nails and tremor in his lip. None spoke. They knew better than to interrupt Mirov when his fingers tapped that rhythm — it was the one he used when calculating how much could be hidden, or how much could no longer be.

"Brothers," he said finally, his voice oily with forced calm, "we have been blessed."

No one responded. A lie always started like that with him — gently, as though it were a toast.

"A letter came this morning. From Chudnikov. In the ministry. You remember Chudnikov — borrowed my hat in Petersburg, never gave it back. A rat, but a useful one."

Still silence. The charity commissioner shifted in his chair, releasing a short cough. The judge scratched the side of his nose without looking up.

"The letter says — and I quote — that a government Commissioner is traveling through our district. From the capital. Incognito."

Now their eyes rose. The words landed like rifle shots. The judge stopped scratching. The school director’s breath caught. The charity commissioner opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again.

"Incognito," repeated Mirov, almost savoring the syllables. "With secret authority. Sent to inspect towns. Especially ours."

"Why especially ours?" the school director asked, blinking fast.

"Because, Luka, fate is a bird that finds the filthiest tree to nest in," Mirov replied. "And we have not exactly been sweeping the branches."

He opened the letter and waved it. "It says, in plain script, 'Be cautious. He may already be there, pretending to be a traveler. Watch for a man who asks little, listens much.'"

"Why would they send someone incognito?" asked the judge, whose red-veined eyes narrowed. "What have they heard?"

Mirov paused. He looked at them, each in turn — the men who had skimmed rations from hospitals, doctored school exam results, bribed merchants with promises of tax forgiveness, and sold every government nail twice. They stared back, faces heavy with sweat and slow panic.

"Perhaps it was the complaint from the widow you flogged over unpaid licensing fees," Mirov said, looking at the charity commissioner. "Or the missing funds for the chapel. Or the court files that smell of schnapps."

He rose, pushed back his chair, and walked to the window. Outside, a horse stood tied to a rail, swatting flies with its tail, the same way it had every day for years. Nothing in the town moved quickly — not justice, not repair, not rumor.

Until now.

"Someone is here," he said quietly. "Watching us already. I feel it. Someone pretending to be nothing, so he can know everything."

Behind him, no one moved. The silence of guilty men filled the room like smoke.

And far down the street, at the faded inn across from the bakery, a man in a brown coat was ordering a meal he could not pay for.

The quiet shattered. Chairs scraped. Voices tumbled over one another in rising pitch, like birds flung from a burning tree.

“We must act at once,” the judge said, rising with sudden clarity. “I’ll see to the courthouse. The goose pens in the entrance hall will be removed. Temporarily.”

“You’ve let them breed there for five years,” the school director snapped.

“It was convenient,” the judge retorted, already turning to the door. “And I like geese.”

“Enough,” barked Mirov, his voice cracking across the room like a cane. “Sit down. All of you. You’ll not flee until you’ve heard what must be done.”

They froze. He pointed at the charity commissioner first, a short man with a girth that suggested he rarely skipped meals.

“Zemlin, go to the hospital. I want clean linens on the beds. Wash the sick or hide them — I don’t care. And write Latin names over every door. Something impressive. Make sure the man with no legs doesn’t smoke his pipe out the window again. If this Commissioner sees that, he’ll think we’re breeding veterans.”

“But the medicine—”

“No medicine. Give them boiled water and call it imported. They’ll believe it. Do you understand me?”

Zemlin nodded, already sweating through his collar.

“Luka,” Mirov turned to the school director, “send word to every teacher: no politics, no history, no speaking unless spoken to. If any of them make faces when they talk, send them home. Especially the one who scratches his neck and calls it thinking.”

“He lectures on ancient wars,” Luka muttered.

“Then he should know when to surrender.”

Mirov paced now, the urgency rising like floodwater in a cracked basin.

“We need street cleaners on every corner. Sweep the mud. Remove the dogs. Find Prokhorov — if he’s sober — and have him whitewash the prison gates. And that rotten fence near the tannery — pull it down, throw straw around, and tell them it’s a renovation. The more rubble, the more believable.”

“What if he visits the court?” the judge asked, quieter now.

“Then you stand upright, smell of soap, and pretend to be wise. If he sees the papers, tell him they’re written in code. If he asks about the missing magistrate, say he’s in Petersburg learning Latin.”

The judge looked at the floor and mumbled a prayer.

Mirov stopped pacing and stared at them all.

“From this moment, there are no lies too big. If he asks about tax rolls, show him the flour inventory. If he asks about the river project, speak of the great fog that halted construction. If he asks where the new chapel is —”

“It burned down,” muttered the charity commissioner.

“It never existed,” corrected Mirov. “But now, it burned down.”

There was a pause. The room felt narrower, as if the walls had drawn breath.

“Find the postmaster,” Mirov said, quieter now. “Tell him to open every letter. If any citizen writes to Petersburg, we must read it first. We cannot afford loose tongues.”

“And if it’s already too late?” asked Luka.

Mirov looked at him. For a moment, his mask dropped, and something small and hunted showed in his eyes.

“Then we smile. And hope he leaves before the wind changes.”

They rose together, each one leaving faster than the last. Outside, the bells in the church tower chimed noon — late, as always, and cracked with rust.

By sundown, a broom would pass over every cobble. By morning, truth would be the only thing not allowed on the streets.

They spilled into the adjoining chamber like roaches disturbed from behind a crate. The office of the tax assessor, abandoned years ago after his mysterious disappearance, had become their unofficial meeting place. There were no windows, only a crooked mirror on the far wall — cracked down the center, as though it, too, were ashamed to reflect what gathered there.

Judge Andrey Volkov leaned against a filing cabinet and lit a cigar with shaky fingers. “You heard him. Latin signs over hospital beds. That would be impressive — if anyone in this town could write in Latin.”

“He’ll never go there,” grunted Zemlin, the charity commissioner, dabbing sweat from his temples. “Commissioners always want figures, not sickbeds. We’ll give him numbers — clean, round, and fake. Half the town doesn’t exist on paper anyway.”

“Aha,” muttered Luka the school director, “until he starts asking why your budget shows money for twelve beds and there are six patients and only one pillow.”

Zemlin waved a hand. “I’ll say the rest are recovering at home. ‘New policy,’ I’ll call it. Progressive treatment — rest and gratitude.”

“You think we’ll be caught over hospitals?” Volkov snapped. “It’s the courthouse he’ll ask about. The records are a forest. I still have files from three years ago marked ‘Pending: Awaiting Bribe.’”

They laughed, nervously, then fell quiet.

“What if he’s clever?” Luka said.

“He won’t be,” said Zemlin flatly. “Men with real power never are. They expect you to tremble when they clear their throat. That’s how you know they’re shallow. It’s the quiet ones you fear.”

“Still,” Luka whispered, “what if he asks why we spent government money on a fountain that doesn’t spray water?”

“Then you say it’s symbolic,” Volkov said. “An artistic installation. Represents the spiritual dryness of the age.”

Zemlin chuckled. “You’re wasted in law, Andrey.”

“I was never in law,” he replied, puffing smoke toward the cracked ceiling. “I only married into the robe.”

Luka sat down on a stool missing one leg and leaned close. “We need a story, something whole — not patches. Something he can believe. Like… like we’re rebuilding the town.”

“With what money?” Zemlin scoffed.

“With the money we never stole,” Luka said. “Just show him half a road paved, bricks scattered around, and say the rest is coming. Commissioners love unfinished things. They can imagine it better than we can build it.”

“And the postmaster,” Volkov said, exhaling smoke, “he’s already opening letters, I hear. Reads them for 'curiosity.’ But now, he’ll do it for protection.”

Zemlin snorted. “He’s illiterate.”

“Exactly. No one will suspect.”

A silence crept in. They listened to their own breath, to the distant ring of a hammer in the street, to the whistle of wind against the shuttered walls.

“He’s already here,” Luka murmured. “I feel it.”

“You feel wind,” Volkov said, but his voice held no mockery. Only dread.

Zemlin stood slowly. “Well, let’s make it look like we run a town. If he asks, we’re busy. If he presses, we’re tired from our labors. If he insists…”

He looked around.

“…then we tell him the truth. Dressed in a lie.”

They nodded. One by one, they filed out. And the cracked mirror watched them go, reflecting only pieces of their retreating faces.

Just as the last of the officials disappeared down the stairwell, the door creaked open again. Two men entered in a tangle of scarves, boots, and urgency — Boris Chernov and Pavel Durnin, landowners of small means and even smaller minds. Their coats, rich in color but worn at the seams, suggested wealth remembered rather than possessed. They looked alike not by blood but by shared purpose: they existed to echo.

Boris was breathing as though he’d run the length of the province, though the inn was only three blocks away. Pavel, slightly shorter and always a half-step behind, carried a rolled newspaper in one hand and a feather in the other, which he claimed was from an eagle but looked suspiciously like it had come from a chicken.

“Mayor Mirov! Mirov!” Boris called, voice high with excitement. “We bring news. Great, suspicious, revelatory news.”

Mirov, who had remained behind, looked up from his chair. “You two again. You always arrive when panic is already seated.”

“This time,” said Pavel, trying to catch his breath, “we have arrived ahead of it.”

“There is a man,” Boris declared, adjusting his cravat. “A man of… distinct presence. At the inn.”

Pavel nodded vigorously. “He’s been there for two weeks. Lives in room number five. Asks for nothing, speaks very little, but always walks with an air. Always.”

“An air,” Boris agreed, “of someone who expects others to apologize for existing.”

“Refuses to pay his bill,” Pavel added. “Eats on credit, drinks wine, though no one has seen him purchase any.”

“Claims,” said Boris, drawing the word out like ribbon, “he is from the capital. Though he never says it directly. He drops names. Big names.”

“St. Petersburg names,” Pavel whispered. “Ministerial names.”

“He wears a ring,” Boris continued. “Gold. Wedding, maybe. But when the barmaid asked about his wife, he winked and said, ‘She only exists when I travel.’”

Mirov straightened. “Describe him.”

“Thin,” Pavel said quickly. “Like a man who eats rarely, but boasts often.”

“Eyes that flick around a room like he’s measuring it for furniture,” Boris added. “And a voice that sounds like it once belonged to someone important, but has been borrowed.”

“And his name?” Mirov asked.

“He gave it once,” Boris said, rubbing his temple. “Alan. No patronymic. Just… Alan.”

There was a pause.

Mirov rose slowly from his chair. “Does he write letters?”

“No,” said Pavel. “He dictates them. To himself. Out loud.”

“Yesterday,” Boris offered, “he told the maid he had a meeting scheduled with a duke. When she laughed, he asked if she liked the smell of silk. Then walked away.”

Mirov said nothing for a long moment. Then he walked to the coatrack, lifted his rusted saber from the hook — a ceremonial blade that had never tasted use — and strapped it on with slow, deliberate movements.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “I believe the Commissioner has arrived.”

Boris beamed. Pavel dropped the feather in triumph.

“I will go to him,” Mirov said. “Not as a servant, not as a coward — but as a man concerned for the comfort of a guest. That is, after all, what we must all pretend to be.”

He turned toward the door, paused, and added, “If I do not return within the hour, write no letters. No confessions. And certainly no poems.”

He left, the sound of his boots fading down the hall.

Boris looked at Pavel and whispered, “Do you think we’ll be remembered for this?”

“No,” said Pavel. “But I’m still keeping the feather.”

The mayor’s boots struck the frozen dirt of the street with practiced confidence, but inside his chest his heart pounded like a gambler before the draw. As he passed the town square, shopkeepers bowed lower than usual. A broom was hastily applied to a puddle of something unnameable. The beggar who slept beneath the bakery’s awning had vanished — or been vanished. The town had caught the scent of authority in the air, and it reacted like a creature afraid of light.

By the time Ivan Mirov reached the inn, three more officials had followed him — the judge, the charity commissioner, and Luka the school director — all breathless, all pretending they’d just happened to be passing by. They gathered outside the wooden door like boys near a grave, each unwilling to knock first.

“He’s in room five,” the innkeeper whispered, wringing his hands in his apron. “Asked for tea, then didn’t drink it. Just stared into the steam like he was reading it.”

“That’s the look of a man with power,” muttered the judge. “Only men of status waste tea.”

“Was he wearing epaulets?” Luka asked.

“No,” said the innkeeper, “but he mentioned ‘Petersburg correspondence’ and asked if this town had a library.”

“A trap,” Mirov said flatly. “No one asks about libraries in towns like this.”

They turned to him, waiting for his decision.

“We go in calm. We go in humble. Speak in half-truths. Let him speak in riddles. The less we understand, the more we nod. Offer him comfort, offer him wine, offer him control. If he asks about our roles, we say we serve. If he asks about our books, we say they are being rewritten. And if he demands silence…”

“We give it,” the judge finished.

Mirov took a breath, squared his shoulders, and pushed open the door to the inn. The others followed, single file, like men entering a shrine built from their own guilt.

At the top of the stairs, a thin man stood silhouetted in the light of his room, tying his cravat in a mirror with the care of someone who believed eyes were watching. His coat was worn, but his posture was regal. He turned slightly, as if aware of their presence before they’d even knocked.

Alan.

Mirov raised his hand to knock, hesitated, then let it fall. Instead, he whispered just loud enough to be heard.

“Sir… may we have a word?”

The Stranger at the Inn

Alan lay sprawled across the narrow bed, one boot dangling half off his foot, the other still laced tightly as if he'd risen from a cavalry campaign and collapsed in mid-triumph. His coat was slung across his shoulder, its collar raised in studied neglect. A few shirt buttons hung open at the chest, though the room was cold. He gazed at the ceiling with the pained expression of a man recalling burdens too great to name.

His stomach gave a long, hollow growl. He pressed his hand to it and exhaled softly, like one too familiar with endurance.

“Always the same in the provinces,” he murmured to no one in particular. “The appetite of duty is never fed.”

A thin boy stood near the door, holding a chipped tray and a cautious expression. His livery was a sagging jacket at least two owners old, and a towel hung across his shoulder like a soldier’s sash in a story he’d never been told.

“The master says no more food unless you pay,” the boy said. “Says you're weeks behind.”

Alan tilted his head, blinking as though the boy had spoken in riddles.

“Did he mention if the courier came by this morning?” Alan asked. “No? Curious. The man who handles those matters—he was with Baron Trofim’s commission, if that means anything to your master. He seldom misses a window.”

The boy shifted awkwardly.

“Last week you said you were waiting on gold from Warsaw,” he muttered. “Now it’s a commission. Yesterday it was an ambassador’s carriage delayed by rain.”

Alan stood, brushing nonexistent dust from his sleeve. “Ah. And you think these are contradictions?”

He approached the cracked mirror, adjusted his cravat by half a millimeter, and smoothed his hair as if about to receive company of rank.

“There are wheels within wheels, lad,” he said, watching himself more than the boy. “When you’ve been entrusted with names I can’t repeat — names that walk beside the Minister of Finance before breakfast — you’ll find delays are not denials. Timing is choreography.”

The boy blinked, uncertain whether he was being spoken to or merely allowed to listen.

“Tell your master,” Alan continued, reaching for his walking stick, “that I regret the delay. If it were up to me, the funds would’ve arrived three days ago, by courier or carrier pigeon, sealed in the blue of the ministry. But alas, such decisions don’t rest with us.”

He looked at the boy then, as if truly seeing him for the first time.

“You’ll learn, eventually, that wealth follows trust. The meal follows the title.”

The boy shifted the tray in his hands. “So… nothing today?”

Alan offered him a gentle, regretful smile. “Today? Today we eat on faith.”

He regarded his reflection with a slow, approving nod, then turned to the boy with a look that might have passed for kindness if not for the curl at the corner of his mouth.

“Tell your master,” he said softly, as though confiding a state secret, “that I’ll take my tea with lemon this morning. No sugar. And if he sends it without fuss, I shan’t trouble anyone in Petersburg with tales of provincial hospitality.” He tapped a finger lightly against his temple. “But I remember names. Especially when they make themselves... memorable.”

The boy blinked.

Alan tilted his head. “Still here?”

The boy took off like a startled rabbit, the rug nearly claiming him on the way out.

Left alone, Alan fell back onto the bed with the practiced drama of a man misunderstood by his century. He draped an arm over his eyes.

“Suffering,” he muttered to the ceiling. “The first symptom of intellect.”

His stomach gurgled in reply.

He sat up and sniffed. Cabbage — somewhere below. The scent called to him like a hymn.

He rose slowly, brushing the front of his shirt, then wandered the room with the air of a man inspecting foreign embassies. One hand played absently with the thin brass ring on his finger — a little trinket, polished nightly, worn like a signal flag.

“Married,” he whispered, watching himself in the mirror. “The married ones... they always carry a certain mystery.”

He straightened his back, adjusted his collar, turned to the side.

“Minister Barinov,” he said in a new voice — resonant, diplomatic, a touch fatigued. “Of course I’ll speak to the ambassador, but I’ll not dine without proper wine, you understand.”

He paused, then offered his reflection a gentle, knowing nod.

“No, no. We don't threaten tariffs, we suggest stability. So much more civilized.”

He smiled, and it was almost real.

At the desk — a wobbly construction of salvaged wood — he took up a reused scrap of paper and dipped his quill into the inkpot, which had long since dried. Undeterred, he began to write with the silent confidence of one certain his words would echo through marbled corridors.

“To the Board of Trade and International Relations, Petersburg. Private.”

He tapped his chin thoughtfully, then scribbled:

“Re: Southern provincial funds. Delay unacceptable. Confidence faltering at elevated levels. Third transfer expected by week’s end.”

He added, in a line of sweeping strokes:

“Copy to: Ministry of Wine Imports. Attn: Baron Volkov.”

He leaned back, scanning his own handwriting with the gravity of a statesman. The quill was dry, the paper blank, but the performance had been flawless.

He set it aside.

Even great men must wait for their tea.

He paused over his desk, examining the empty page as though it held invisible ink known only to ministers. The parchment bore no words, only the faint pressure of his stylized script — a ghost of importance. With careful ceremony, he folded the blank sheet in thirds, pressed the edges flat, and sealed it with a drip of wax drawn from the stub of a spent candle. There was no crest. Just a mark to suggest one.

He set the sealed nothing atop a growing pile of staged correspondence and returned to the mirror.

“Activity is everything,” he muttered. “The influential are never early. They make time chase them.”

With a practiced flick of his wrist, he arranged the desk like a battlefield after some high-level negotiation: papers scattered with just enough carelessness to suggest urgency; his coat slung over the chair at a deliberate angle, its lining visible; a handkerchief barely visible in the pocket — monogrammed, of course, and not with his own initials.

He studied the scene as a painter might survey a completed canvas.

Then, back at the mirror, he stood still. His mouth did not move at first. Then, quietly, as if repeating a line rehearsed since boyhood:
“You are expected. You are missed. You are not forgotten.”

A small nod. A breath.

He turned sharply and sat again on the edge of the bed, hands resting on his knees like a man awaiting a summons.

His stomach protested, louder this time. He glanced down at it and scowled.

“Shh,” he whispered. “They’re listening.”

There was a knock — soft, hesitant. Alan rose slowly, as if the act required a decision of state.

“Yes?” he called, voice low and composed.

The door opened an inch, and a girl stepped in. Her dress was too thin for the season, her freckles bright against pale cheeks. A red ribbon in her hair caught the light like something out of place — too clean, too cared for.

She held a tray: a chipped teacup, a slice of bread leaning sideways, and nothing else.

“Mister Alan,” she said, eyes not quite meeting his, “they send their regards. There’s no lemon, no sugar. Bread’s from yesterday, but it’s soft inside.”

Alan placed a hand to his chest and tilted his head with slow, tragic grace.

“And yet,” he said, “this is how the Empire feeds its servants. I was meant to dine with the Governor General in Moscow last week — missed it by a day, you know. Bad timing. A river crossing.”

The girl blinked, unsure whether to apologize or curtsy.

He stepped forward, voice dropping.

“I don’t say this for sympathy,” he said. “But you should know — there are wine merchants in Odessa who won’t ship until I’ve given my word. Silk caravans have paused at the border, awaiting one letter from this very hand.” He gestured vaguely at the desk. “And yet here I am. Borrowed bed. Cold tea. The empire moves at strange angles.”

She looked down at the tray. “Still warm,” she offered.

Alan accepted the cup with gentle solemnity, raising it to the light like a chalice.

“It’s not the tea that matters,” he said. “It’s the one who brings it.”

A faint smile tugged at her mouth, uncertain, but there.

He watched it carefully.

“And you?” he asked. “Do they treat you well here?”

She shrugged, adjusting the tray in her hands.

“It’s not Paris,” she said.

Alan smiled. He had the scent now.

"Nor should it be. I find French service theatrical. Too much bowing. Too many words before the soup. But you —" He leaned in. "You are something different. A quiet grace. A rare commodity."

She blushed, looked away, adjusted the tray.

He tapped his ring on the edge of the cup, just loud enough.

"Married life," he sighed. "It teaches a man the value of silence."

"Your wife must be lucky," the maid said without much conviction.

"She is," Alan said. "Though she doesn't always know it."

Behind her, another figure appeared in the doorway. Ferdinand, Alan's servant — stoop-shouldered, narrow-eyed, and always appearing just when Alan wished he wouldn't.

"There's no inheritance letter, sir," Ferdinand muttered. "I checked the post again. Just a bill from a tailor in Riga."

Alan flashed a glare that could melt soap. "Ah yes," he said, turning to the maid. "The Riga account. A misunderstanding. I purchased a shipment of formalwear for diplomatic engagements — silk-lined. I sent half to Vienna. The rest is... delayed."

"I'm sure," Ferdinand said, already turning away.

The maid set the tray down gently, clearly uncertain now.

Alan recovered quickly. "You may go, my dear. And thank you. Your steps are lighter than most."

She gave a small curtsy and slipped out.

Alan had just taken a theatrical bite of the stale bread when a knock came again, louder this time — not the hesitant tap of a servant, but the authoritative kind that presumed the door would open on command. He paused mid-chew, narrowed his eyes at Ferdinand.

"Tell me that wasn't the landlord."

Ferdinand didn't answer. He stood instead, brushed crumbs from his coat, and muttered, "It's not the landlord."

Another knock, firmer.

Alan wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, quickly adjusted his cravat, and made a point of sitting down with a half-finished letter in front of him. He dipped the dry quill once more in the inkless pot for effect.

"Enter," he called, voice full of bored importance.

The door opened slowly. In stepped Mayor Ivan Mirov, his saber strapped clumsily to his side, boots polished but creased, eyes darting around the room before settling on Alan. Beside him was a thin man with a bald patch and a folder of notes tucked beneath his arm — his assistant, name unknown, function undefined, but eyes sharp and hungry.

“Forgive the intrusion,” Mirov said with a stiff bow, “I am Ivan Mirov, Mayor of this district. We were informed that a… distinguished guest had taken residence here.”

Alan blinked once, then slowly rose, allowing the silence to stretch like ribbon before speaking.

“Ah,” he said. “So this is hospitality in the provinces.”

The assistant scribbled something quickly.

Mirov cleared his throat. “We apologize if the accommodations are not—”

“They are not,” Alan interrupted. “But I am a man of tolerance.”

Another scribble.

“Allow me to explain,” Mirov continued. “As Mayor, I make it a personal duty to ensure that any traveler of status, especially from the capital, is… comfortable.”

Alan walked past him to the window, hands clasped behind his back. “A noble gesture.”

“You are from Petersburg, yes?” the assistant ventured, eager.

Alan turned, very slowly. “I am from everywhere people owe debts. But yes — recently, the capital.”

Mirov and his aide exchanged a glance. The mayor’s shoulders tensed.

“And your purpose here…?” the assistant asked.

Alan let out a soft laugh, the kind meant to disarm while concealing sharp edges. “My purpose?” He gestured vaguely at the desk. “Matters of the state. The kind not written plainly. You understand.”

“Of course,” Mirov said, bowing again. “Naturally.”

“Discretion,” Alan said, “is rare in such places.”

“We pride ourselves on it,” the assistant said quickly.

“I’m sure you do,” Alan said. He moved toward them, slowly, as if deciding whether they were worth his time. “You may tell your offices that I am not to be disturbed without cause. My time is… narrow. My responsibilities, wide.”

“Yes,” Mirov said, bowing again, lower this time. “We merely came to ensure that the proper respect was being shown. And to extend, of course, the full services of the town should you require anything.”

“I require many things,” Alan said, lifting his teacup, “but I’ve learned not to ask for them.”

The assistant scribbled so fast the quill squeaked.

Mirov straightened. “Should you require an escort… or a carriage… or a report on the hospital…”

“I’ve seen enough of hospitals,” Alan replied quickly, “and too many carriages. What I require is peace. And discretion.”

“Of course,” Mirov said. “You shall have both.”

Alan gave a small nod, half-dismissive, half-pleased. “Then let us consider this meeting a success.”

The mayor hesitated. Then bowed again and turned for the door, his assistant following quickly, still scribbling as they went.

When the door clicked shut behind them, Alan turned to Ferdinand, who stood stone-still.

“What was that?” Ferdinand asked.

Alan smiled faintly, sipped his cold tea, and whispered, “That, my dear Ferdinand, was a greeting to a stage I did not build.”

And he sat, folded his hands, and waited for the curtain to rise.

For a few moments after the mayor’s departure, Alan sat motionless. The room, though unchanged, felt tighter now, like it had been measured by invisible eyes. He stared at the closed door. A bead of sweat crept down his temple. He wiped it away with his sleeve and glanced at Ferdinand, who said nothing.

Dinner

Later that afternoon, Alan was summoned again — this time not by knock, but by an envelope slipped under his door. The paper was stiff, perfumed faintly, and bore the town’s seal, though it had clearly been pressed with a bottle cap. Inside, the mayor’s handwriting slanted forward with both urgency and fear:

Your Excellency,
Permit me, with deepest apologies, to invite you to a private reception in your honor this evening. I regret if the humble welcome you received thus far has not matched the dignity of

your rank. We are simple men here, and often clumsy in the presence of greatness. I ask only your patience — and, if allowed, your forgiveness.

— Mayor Ivan Mirov

Alan read it twice, then let the paper fall to the floor as though its contents had bored him.

He stretched, rolled his shoulders, and began rehearsing expressions in the mirror. A slow nod of distant approval. A raised brow of diplomatic dismay. A brief, regretful sigh — suggesting that one had seen worse, but hoped for better.

An hour later, he descended the staircase like a man arriving from a long journey rather than two flights up. The parlor at the foot of the stairs had been transformed in haste — mismatched rugs layered to hide stains, crooked portraits rearranged to look official, and in the center of it all, Mayor Mirov stood waiting beside a table groaning under the weight of borrowed silverware.

"Your Excellency," Mirov began, stepping forward with his hat pressed to his chest, "please forgive our earlier... rustic approach. We were unaware — we did not wish to presume…"

"You presumed nothing," Alan said, interrupting, not unkindly but with just enough distance. "It is common in provincial towns to misplace courtesy. It takes effort to recognize status unannounced."

Mirov bowed low. "I assure you, sir, we are prepared to make that effort. My people are devoted. There may be... little to impress in this town, but our loyalty is unquestionable."

"Loyalty is often louder in silence," Alan replied, glancing over the room. "Though I see you've made noise where you could."

"Only to welcome you properly," Mirov said quickly. "We wish you to know that everything in this town is open to your inspection. There is nothing we fear you to see."

Alan raised an eyebrow. "That is a curious way to phrase it."

Mirov flushed. "I mean... we hide nothing."

"Of course you don't," Alan said, pausing just long enough. Then he nodded slightly, as though approving a difficult child.

Mirov exhaled in relief. "If there is anything you require during your stay — a carriage, attendants, private papers…"

"I require quiet," Alan said, turning toward the armchair that had been positioned carefully beneath the chandelier. He sat, crossed his legs, and looked around the room as if appraising it for its potential to hold secrets.

"I find that in silence," he added, "men say the most."

Mirov stood there, uncertain whether to sit or remain standing. Alan let him suffer a beat longer, then gestured lazily toward the chair opposite.

“Let us begin,” he said. “I assume you brought something worth hearing.”

Mirov nodded, swallowing hard, and began to speak.

Alan leaned back, eyes half-lidded, the picture of a man who expected truth — and planned to believe none of it.

Mayor Mirov cleared his throat and signaled toward the sideboard, where a heavy-lidded silver dish had been set. A servant, summoned with a glance, stepped forward and uncovered it — not food, as Alan might have expected, but a stack of sealed envelopes bound together with red ribbon.

“A small courtesy,” Mirov said, almost too casually, “from our town to one of such… enduring responsibility.”

Alan did not look at the stack directly. Instead, he tilted his head slightly, as if the gesture bored him.

“Gratitude,” Mirov continued, “is all we can offer in return for the labor of men who serve from behind the curtain. It is said that those who keep the empire’s wheels turning do not always dine from its tables.”

Alan still did not move. He tapped his fingers together in his lap, his ring glinting.

“I have not asked for compensation,” he said finally.

“And yet,” Mirov replied smoothly, “you have earned it.”

Alan looked to the servant, who had not moved. Then, slowly, he rose, walked to the sideboard, and picked up the stack. It had weight. He didn’t open the envelopes, didn’t count them, didn’t need to.

“Strange,” he said, turning them over once in his hand. “In Petersburg, we call this ‘administrative goodwill.’ Here, you still call it ‘hospitality.’”

Mirov chuckled a bit too loudly. “We are old-fashioned, Your Excellency.”

Alan tucked the bundle into the inner pocket of his coat with the grace of someone accepting a note, not a bribe. Then he turned back to his seat.

“You understand, of course,” he said, sitting again, “that I must refuse future gestures of this sort. Too many courtesies distract from one’s clarity of judgment.”

Mirov nodded quickly. “Certainly, certainly. This is the last, I assure you.”

Alan nodded, pleased. “Good. I prefer to inspect a place unclouded by generosity.”

“But,” the mayor added quickly, “should you require anything else... of a personal nature... a quiet evening, a change of wardrobe, perhaps companionship—”

Alan raised a hand, silencing him.

“If I require companionship,” he said, “I shall call for it in Latin.”

The mayor blinked, unsure whether it was a jest, then smiled nervously.

“I find,” Alan said, reaching for the teacup beside him, “that every man, if left alone long enough, reveals more than he intended. So, let us sit quietly now. Speak when necessary.”

Mirov nodded again, bowed slightly, and took his seat. He folded his hands, lips pressed tight. His eyes kept flicking toward Alan’s coat pocket, where the bribe now rested like a buried confession.

Alan sipped his tea with the faintest of smiles, his eyes drifting to the window, where the town beyond continued to sweep its streets in panic — still unaware that the man they feared was, in fact, one of their own.

The silence didn’t last. Mirov, though warned, couldn’t resist the pull of uncertainty. He shifted in his chair, cleared his throat, and leaned forward with the tentative air of a man requesting permission to speak in his own home.

“If I may, Your Excellency... are you attached to any particular ministry?”

Alan set down his teacup, ran a finger along the rim, then looked up slowly.

“Attached? No. That would suggest I am held in place by something. Let us say… I orbit. Closer to some, farther from others, but always in motion.”

Mirov nodded, feigning comprehension.

“My last assignment,” Alan continued, “was advisory. A conflict in the southern territories — legal ambiguity regarding canal ownership. Ottoman-backed merchants, one side; a regional syndicate, the other. Everyone thought it was about water rights. Fools. It was about influence. Influence always hides where people speak of necessity.”

Mirov blinked. “Yes, yes, of course.”

“The matter was resolved,” Alan went on, “after I rewrote the shipping codes to define fluid volume in terms of ‘strategic resource ratio’ instead of liters.”

“I see,” Mirov said, clearly not seeing anything.

“Before that, I was asked to observe the restructuring of the military supply chain in the western steppe. Too much bread, not enough bullets. Typical imbalance. I advised a redistribution.”

He paused, narrowing his eyes.

“You’ve read the ‘Miroshki Paper’ on field logistics, no doubt?”

Mirov’s mouth opened, closed, then opened again. “Naturally. Though, remind me... the Miroshki—?”

Alan waved a hand. “Not important. Outdated now. Mine supersedes it. Less emphasis on elevation, more on exhaustion radius.”

“Brilliant,” Mirov murmured.

Alan leaned back. “And finance. They keep calling me back to finance.”

“Of course they do.”

“Tax modeling,” Alan said, warming to the fiction. “Pyramidal layering, with inverted projections. It’s all about illusion. If people believe their money is being seen by someone above them, they behave better.”

Mirov laughed nervously. “That sounds very familiar.”

Alan smiled. “It should. The entire tax model used here — I reviewed it once, long ago. Purely out of curiosity.”

He stood, walked to the window, gazed out thoughtfully.

Mirov stood as well, nodding reverently.

“I am fortunate,” he said, “to host a man of such... precision.”

Alan turned, slowly, hands behind his back. “You’re more fortunate than you know.”

They came like moths toward a lantern — one by one, wrapped in their finest coats, each carrying a gift that trembled faintly in their hands. The hallway outside the parlor filled with hushed voices and the occasional hissed argument over who should go in next. Inside, Alan remained seated in the same high-backed chair beneath the chandelier, looking less like a guest than a magistrate disguised as a guest, sipping cooled tea as if it were cognac.

The first to step through the door was Judge Volkov, who bowed so low his glasses fell from his nose and clattered to the floor. He shuffled to retrieve them, then extended a velvet pouch.

“Just a humble offering,” he said. “Local coins of historical value. From a private collection.”

Alan took the pouch with two fingers and did not open it.

“A man who treasures history,” he said, “usually does so because the present makes him nervous.”

Volkov’s lips parted, then closed again. “Yes, quite.”

He backed out stiffly, replaced by Luka, the school director, who entered carrying a small oil painting wrapped in brown cloth. He unwrapped it halfway to reveal a clumsy portrait —

perhaps meant to be Czar Alexander, though the expression more closely resembled a startled dog.

“I thought, Your Excellency,” Luka said, “this might please your eye. My brother paints. Self-taught.”

Alan leaned forward just enough to peer at it.

“It’s... evocative.”

Luka beamed, bowed, and shuffled out. Next came Zemlin, the charity commissioner, dragging a small crate of cured meats. He tried to say something, but Alan raised a hand.

“I do not dine on obligation,” he said.

Zemlin nodded hastily. “They’re smoked. No obligation. Just… admiration.”

He left the crate at the mayor’s feet and vanished.

The room grew heavier with each arrival. The assistant tax assessor brought an antique pipe wrapped in silk. The fire warden offered imported coffee beans, still green and likely pilfered. A retired lieutenant donated a bottle of schnapps and whispered something about national security.

Through it all, Alan remained cool, receiving each token with polite disinterest, as though he expected much more — or had already been given too much. Whenever they stammered to explain their position or tried to impress him with their titles, he would interrupt.

“Your role is noted,” he said to one.

“I’ll remember your dedication,” he told another.

And to a third, who spoke too long about municipal duties, he said, “It’s always those with the least responsibility who speak the most of their burden.”

That one left blushing.

The Tour

Morning broke under a curtain of clouds, and with it came a procession. Alan stood at the head of it, arms crossed behind his back, posture stiff with assumed duty, as the mayor and his entourage shuffled around him like stagehands trying to position a statue.

A carriage had been prepared — freshly scrubbed, its wheels repainted overnight — but Alan had declined it with a dismissive wave. “Too conspicuous,” he’d said. “Let us walk. The ground speaks louder than walls.”

So they walked.

The town unfolded itself before him like a poorly rehearsed opera, each scene set with desperate care. First came the hospital, a squat white building that smelled faintly of boiled rags and regret. The charity commissioner stepped forward with a rehearsed speech.

“This is our finest ward,” he declared, gesturing toward a hallway where one patient sat upright, blinking with confusion. “Clean, organized, and quite admired by visiting physicians from Yaroslavl.”

Alan peered down the corridor. Beds had been made with mismatched sheets, and hastily printed Latin labels hung over the doors: *PULMO—*, *RENES—*, *DIGESTIA—*. One had been labeled simply *HUMORS*.

“I see,” Alan murmured, walking slowly past a nurse who curtsied too low and bumped her head on the doorframe.

The next stop was the school. There, the school director Luka stood outside the gate, sweating into his collar and holding a child’s essay like a diploma.

“Our students are... exceptional,” he said.

Inside, children had been lined up in rows and handed books, many of them upside down. One boy recited the alphabet backwards, though no one had asked him to. Another stood at the blackboard, drawing a triangle and labeling it *Justice*.

Alan walked slowly between the rows, nodding once, offering nothing in return but the click of his boots. He stopped beside one child who whispered, “Are you the emperor?” and replied with, “Sometimes.”

Outside again, the officials huddled like a choir awaiting review. The mayor stepped forward. “Shall we continue to the town hall?”

Alan nodded. “Yes. I’m curious to see where such fine order originates.”

The town hall had been hastily repainted — the wet gloss still catching dust — and smelled strongly of turpentine. Inside, clerks stood at their desks in stiff silence, frozen mid-task like statues. A chalkboard bore a list of town priorities hastily scrawled that morning: *Transparency, Growth, Ethics, and Weather Preparedness*.

Alan approached a cabinet, opened it, and found it empty.

“Efficient,” he said. “No clutter.”

The officials laughed. Alan didn’t.

By midday, they had shown him every office, every alley they deemed presentable. They had explained, excused, and embellished.

The hospital loomed ahead like a mausoleum repurposed — scrubbed hard, its stone façade streaked from a rushed coat of lime. Alan approached with the dignified gait of a man who

expected clean corridors and whispered reverence. The charity commissioner scurried ahead, barking soft commands into doorways before Alan arrived.

Inside, the air was thick with bleach and something older, less honest. The floor had been scrubbed in wide, clumsy circles, and every wall bore new paint — still wet in places, the smell sharp and desperate. The halls echoed, not with the sound of pain or medicine, but with practiced silence.

"This is our newest wing," Zemlin announced, gesturing proudly toward a corridor where not a single patient could be seen. "We have... rotated the most critical cases to more private spaces. For their comfort."

Alan stopped before a door labeled *CEREBROSIA* in thick black ink.

"Ah," he said, "yes. Mental vigor."

"Yes, exactly," Zemlin agreed instantly. "That's the very one. We focus on restoring… cognitive alignment."

Alan gave a thoughtful nod, repeating, "*Cerebrosia perpetua.* Very progressive."

Zemlin blinked but bowed anyway.

They continued. In one chamber, a nurse stood beside a bed with a motionless figure under a blanket. Alan paused and squinted at the figure. The chest didn't rise.

"This one is… resting deeply," Zemlin whispered, hastily nudging the nurse with his elbow.

"Ah," Alan said. "*Somnificus profundum.*"

The nurse bowed low, too low, and bumped the tray of boiled water beside her, spilling it onto the floor.

In another room, three patients sat upright, hands folded neatly in their laps, eyes glazed. They were dressed in stiff hospital gowns that looked recently washed — but one man's still had a price tag dangling from the collar.

"Therapeutic meditation," Zemlin said quickly. "They're instructed to focus inward."

"*Contemplatio interioris,*" Alan said solemnly, folding his hands as if in prayer.

At a side table, an open medical journal lay face-up, revealing a calendar. Alan tilted his head. The date was two years old.

He turned to Zemlin. "Your resources are limited, and yet you maintain such order."

Zemlin smiled, exhaling in relief. "We do what we must."

"You do it... creatively."

Alan stepped away from the patients, stopped at a door marked *SANITATIO RESPIRARE* — the letters uneven, written hastily with a charcoal stick.

“Ah,” he said, “The Ward of Clean Breathing.”

Zemlin hesitated. “Yes. Precisely.”

Alan leaned close and whispered, “You’ve made impressive use of... multilingual signage. Most towns would be afraid of appearing so advanced.”

Zemlin puffed up with pride. “We believe in the power of appearances.”

Alan gave him a long look, then clapped him gently on the shoulder. “You’ll go far.”

And with that, he turned and walked back down the corridor, the sound of his boots echoing among the faked Latin, the painted walls, and the hidden coughs behind closed doors.

The tour had ended, but the performance did not. That evening, as the officials scattered to revise documents and invent new phrases of borrowed dignity, Alan lingered at the mayor’s residence, where a quiet supper had been laid out under the guise of courtesy, though its true purpose hung as plainly in the air as the scent of roasted duck.

It was there, in the shaded garden behind the house, that he first spoke at length to her.

Kira Mirov, the mayor’s daughter, stood beneath the branches of a low cypress tree, her hand resting on the neck of a violin she did not play. She wore pale blue silk, slightly creased from too many hours spent seated, and her eyes held that wary brightness common in women who had learned to speak little while hearing everything.

Alan approached without haste. He adjusted his coat, ran a hand through his hair with a calculated touch of carelessness, and stopped a few paces from her.

“You look like someone who’s been waiting to escape,” he said.

She turned slowly, uncertain whether to be amused.

“Escape what?”

He glanced back toward the dining room windows where her father sat hunched in conversation with the tax assessor, both whispering like criminals hoping not to be overheard by their own guilt.

“That,” Alan said simply.

She smiled faintly. “You must think this place very small.”

“Everything is small when viewed from far enough above.”

“Is that how you see the world?”

Alan tilted his head. “It’s how the world taught me to see it.”

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “And what does a man like you see when he looks at a town like this?”

He took a step closer, voice lowering. “A place that tries very hard not to be seen. But you… I imagine you dream in cities.”

She looked at him carefully, like a reader holding a page just too close.

“And you,” she said, “seem very sure of yourself.”

“I’m not,” he replied. “But people assume I am. And sometimes assumptions do the work of truth.”

She laughed softly. “You’re not like anyone here.”

“I’m not like anyone anywhere,” he said. Then, with a glance to the shadows near the veranda, he added in a hush, “But don’t tell your father. I’m officially no one at all.”

“Then who am I speaking to?”

Alan leaned in, so close she could see the worn edge of his brass ring.

“Let’s just say I travel... with diplomatic protection.”

Her brows lifted slightly.

“Immunity,” he whispered. “It allows a man to speak freely. Even... romantically.”

She met his gaze and didn’t flinch.

“And does that protection cover broken hearts?”

Alan smiled — not his usual smirk, but something more delicate, as if she had asked a question he’d never dared to answer aloud.

“No,” he said, “but it does keep the past from chasing me too quickly.”

She looked away first. But when she did, it was not to leave.

Later that night, as the moon climbed pale and silent above the rooftops, Alan found himself summoned to the drawing room by the mayor’s wife, under the pretense of polite company. The mayor had excused himself to review “urgent municipal concerns,” which in truth meant he had taken to the cellar with a bottle of wine and a need to breathe. The daughter had vanished up the stairs in a rustle of silk and a glance that lingered just long enough.

The mayor’s wife — Natalia — was waiting by the hearth, a thin smile painted with restraint and boredom. Her gown was simple, but the lace at her wrists was of Petersburg quality. She did not rise when Alan entered.

“Sit, won’t you?” she said. “It’s late, but then, important men never keep ordinary hours.”

Alan bowed slightly, eyes scanning the room as though it mattered. “Only the unimportant rush.”

“Of course,” she replied, pouring two glasses of something dark and fragrant. “We’re quite used to visitors of your... ambiguity.”

He accepted the drink and sat cautiously across from her.

Natalia Mirov had the air of a woman who had hosted many men she did not admire — and remembered them all in detail. Her eyes moved without hurry, yet missed nothing.

“I’ve heard the town’s officials are very taken with you,” she said.

“Flattery is an occupational hazard,” Alan replied.

“And my husband?” she asked, sipping. “Does he flatter as well?”

“He serves,” Alan said, carefully.

She laughed — low, amused. “Yes. That’s one word for it.”

There was a pause. The fire snapped gently.

“You’ve made quite the impression,” she continued, her voice smooth as warmed oil. “The hospital, the school, all those little places they hide their shame. And now, I hear, even my daughter.”

Alan did not answer at once. He watched the flame dance in her glass.

“She’s clever,” he said finally.

“She’s young,” Natalia corrected. “And clever enough to be dangerous only to herself.”

He tried to regain ground with a wry smile. “You speak as if I’m the danger.”

“You are,” she said without hesitation. “But not the way you think.”

Alan shifted slightly in his chair. “Is that a warning?”

“It’s a dance,” she said, leaning forward. “I’ve seen men like you before. Not often — but enough to recognize the scent. A man without a country but with too many names. You speak just enough to let others write your story for you.”

“And yet here you are,” he replied, “writing part of it yourself.”

Natalia tilted her head. “Don’t mistake my interest for belief. I enjoy games, Mr. Alan. Especially when the rules are unclear. But games, you see, only last as long as no one’s bored.”

Her gaze held his, unblinking.

For the first time in days, Alan felt his mouth dry.

“You are,” he said slowly, “more perceptive than your husband.”

“I married the mayor,” she said, “not the town.”

She rose, setting her glass down.

“Enjoy the night,” she added. “While it still belongs to you.”

And then she left the room — neither hurried nor slow — leaving Alan alone with the fire and the heavy awareness that he had just met someone playing at a level far nearer to his own.

If not higher.

The following morning, mist clung low to the ground, the kind that made the town seem quieter than it truly was. Alan sat beneath the awning of the inn, legs crossed, fingers laced over his stomach, a single glove dangling from one hand like a discarded question. He no longer played the role of a man waiting — he had begun to inhabit it fully, as though the world now tilted toward him by default.

A carriage pulled up, modest and dusty, and from it stepped Judge Volkov — hunched, thick-browed, always sweating. He looked around as if ensuring no one saw him, then shuffled quickly toward Alan with a leather satchel clutched close to his chest.

“Your Excellency,” the judge said, bowing with urgency, “forgive the intrusion. I come only with a small gesture. A personal one.”

Alan raised an eyebrow but did not move. “You judges are growing generous.”

“It’s not generosity,” Volkov said quickly. “It’s... gratitude. We in the court appreciate your subtle interest in local affairs.”

Alan held out his hand, not demanding, simply expectant. The judge placed the satchel into his palm with the reverence of a priest offering relics. Alan opened it slowly.

Inside, beneath a folded kerchief and a half-empty inkwell, was a roll of bills, thick and hastily bundled with string. Tucked beside it, a bottle of foreign liquor and a letter with no writing on it — only a pressed seal.

Alan closed the satchel without a word.

“Shall I assume,” he said, “that your docket is now clear of... inconvenient matters?”

“Completely,” Volkov said, wiping his forehead. “Anything you wish reviewed, removed, or rewritten — I can arrange.”

Alan stood slowly. “That won’t be necessary.”

Volkov blinked. “It won’t?”

“No,” Alan said, slipping the satchel under his coat, “because you’ve already done it. That’s what this is, isn’t it? Payment for guilt not yet confessed.”

The judge stammered. “I—only meant to—”

Alan placed a hand on his shoulder and smiled with theatrical warmth.

“Don’t explain. The more silence I meet in this town, the more I’m convinced of its noise.”

The judge nodded, bowed again, and hurried back to his carriage, muttering something about his docket and the weather.

As the wheels clattered away, Alan turned to find Ferdinand watching from the doorway.

Deeper Ties

By the end of that week, Alan no longer measured his performance by survival — he measured it by awe. His words had grown longer, his silences more strategic, and the acts... bolder. No longer content with veiled suggestions of influence, he now spoke as a man who shaped events with the flick of a signature and the angle of a glance. And the town, like a superstitious audience at a séance, hung on every word, desperate not to break the spell.

In the mayor’s parlor, during one of the now-nightly gatherings of flattery and fear, Alan stood before the fireplace with a brandy glass he hadn’t paid for and said, with perfect calm:

“I remember the President’s breath smelled of anise. Or was it cardamom? Something Eastern. He’d just returned from talks in Ankara, his mind heavy, I could tell. But still—he listened.”

The room froze. No one asked which president. They dared not.

Alan continued. “I told him, 'Sir, the issue isn’t policy — it’s posture. People need to believe their leaders are taller than the architecture around them.' He laughed. Said I should’ve been an actor. Then he signed the decree.”

Silence. Then the mayor himself chuckled nervously, nodding as if he’d been there.

Later, when the judge tried to change the topic to local trade, Alan dismissed it with a lazy wave.

“I’ve no time for petty tariffs,” he said. “My holdings in the Zurich Exchange alone have yielded more in sleep than this town’s granaries do in seasons.”

No one questioned him. Who would question a man who wore diplomatic mystery like a cloak?

“Besides,” he added, swirling the brandy, “I’ve divested most of my interest in Baltic copper. Moved funds to Brazilian sugar and certain quiet banks in Gibraltar. Safer there. Less talk.”

The mayor's daughter, Kira, looked at him from across the room, her expression unreadable. Natalia, the wife, narrowed her eyes with the faintest smirk.

“And your shares in the Bank of Shanghai?” someone asked.

Alan didn’t blink. “Still frozen. Until the negotiations over the canal are resolved.”

“The Suez?” asked the school director, uncertain.

“No,” Alan replied, drawing the word out like a blade. “The one they don’t write about.”

Alan smiled to himself.

The evenings grew longer, and with them, Alan’s talk thickened like smoke in a closed room. The innkeeper, once suspicious, now bowed so low at Alan’s passing that his spine protested audibly. Meals were brought to his room without request, silver lids lifted with silent reverence — though more often than not, the plates went untouched.

Alan had begun to refuse company at dinner. “I can’t be seen dining with town officials,” he said. “It blurs the lines of protocol.”

Even Ferdinand, who had grown used to his master’s vanities, found himself relegated to a kind of shadow role — silent assistant, uninvited critic.

“You haven’t eaten in two days,” Ferdinand said, setting down a tray of poached eggs and stale bread.

“I’m fasting,” Alan replied, lounging on the settee in yesterday’s shirt. “It sharpens the mind. Pity you’ve never tried it.”

Ferdinand frowned. “You’re drunk.”

Alan raised his glass and examined the amber within. “Not yet. But I intend to be.”

He stood up unsteadily and crossed to the mirror, fixing his collar and smoothing his thinning hair with a wetted hand.

“You see,” he said, “there’s a rhythm to power. An intoxication deeper than anything you’ll find in a bottle. And I — I conduct it. I am the composer, Ferdinand.”

“I’ll be dressing for a private supper later,” Alan added, voice thickening. “Not here. Somewhere appropriate. I’ve been offered the judge’s garden. He’s laying out imported wine and speaks four languages — badly, but it’s the effort that counts.”

“You hate the judge.”

“I admire his fear. It’s the only honest thing in him.”

Alan turned back to the mirror, raising his glass in salute to his reflection. “Look at him,” he whispered. “A man above consequence.”

Ferdinand paused at the threshold. “Above it, maybe. But not out of reach.”

Alan didn’t hear him — or pretended not to.

The inn’s telegram office was a narrow room tucked beside the stables, always smelling faintly of coal and wet rope. Its operator — a silent boy with a lazy eye and a fondness for boiled carrots — barely looked up when Alan entered. He simply handed over a blank form and stepped back, as though the message would draft itself.

Alan sat with a sigh, smoothing his crumpled cuffs, and dipped the pen in ink. He stared at the page a moment before writing, letting the lies line up politely in his mind, like dinner guests waiting to be seated.

To: Gregor Barinov — Samara District
Brother,

Forgive my delay. Circumstances have changed swiftly. I have been appointed to a confidential position—an advisory post to a man whose name I cannot mention but whose influence stretches far beyond this province. Enormous potential here. Timed perfectly.

There is an opportunity, but I must act quickly. I need five hundred rubles. Not for myself — you know I would never ask — but for investment, through a Petersburg associate of mine. He manages foreign securities discreetly. We are on the brink of acquiring a stake in a shipment of Transylvanian tin — quietly backed by a consortium of Dutch traders.

Profit is inevitable, Gregor. He estimates twenty percent return within six weeks. Possibly more. I would offer you a share, naturally. This is our chance to rise, finally. To be seen.

Send funds by post immediately. Time is critical. I’ll repay you the moment the papers are signed.

Your brother,
A.

He folded the message, blew gently to dry the ink, and passed it to the boy with two kopeks. The boy took it without question.

As Alan stepped back out into the gray morning light, he lit a cigarette with a flick of his chipped silver case. He exhaled slowly, watching the smoke rise like a silent prayer.

“He’ll send it,” he muttered to himself.

And he walked off, the smoke trailing behind him, curling through the cold air like the path of a man who no longer knew where truth ended and performance began.

She was not the mayor's daughter nor some fragile niece of a court official — just a seamstress's sister, come to town to help with preparations for a civic celebration no one truly understood. Her name was Anastasia, and she met Alan by accident, which is to say: precisely how he preferred it.

He found her in the square, arms full of ribbon and linen, struggling with a stubborn cart wheel while two apprentices smoked and watched idly. Alan approached without haste, took the wheel in hand, and turned it with theatrical ease.

"Let it not be said," he murmured, brushing his hands together, "that the capital sends no help."

She looked up, eyes quick. "You're not from here."

"No," he said, lowering his voice just enough, "and I won't be staying long."

That night, he found her again outside the candle shop, and again near the baker's window, and by the third time, it was no accident at all.

They walked together beneath the shadows of closed shutters. She asked little. He offered fragments. Glimpses. Myths.

"I shouldn't be speaking to you like this," he said softly.

"Why?"

He held up his hand, the brass ring catching the lamplight.

"I'm married," he said.

She blinked. Her face didn't fall, didn't harden. Instead, she tilted her head, curious. "Why tell me that?"

"Because," Alan whispered, stepping closer, "I'm not supposed to tell anyone."

Her breath caught, barely. He leaned in.

"She's… influential. Powerful. Not in a grand way. Quiet power — the kind that makes enemies disappear before they know they've been noticed."

"And you love her?"

Alan looked away, then back with such crafted pain in his eyes that even Ferdinand, had he seen it, would've believed.

"I loved what she could have been," he said. "But I belong to another kind of life now."

Anastasia stood very still.

"You're not here by choice, are you?" she asked.

“I’m never anywhere by choice,” he said. “Only duty.”

And with that, he let silence fill the air between them. Not pushing. Just waiting.

She reached for his hand.

“If you’re lying,” she said, “you lie beautifully.”

Alan bent and kissed her fingers.

And beneath the curtain of that lie, cloaked in danger and romance and fiction shaped like truth, she let herself fall just far enough to believe.

And he — he felt nothing. Only the familiar hum of performance sliding perfectly into place.

A government coach, neither ornate nor poor, rumbled along the muddy road that connected the town to the broader world. The horses were sturdy, the wheels greased, and the man inside said little. He wore no uniform, bore no crest, and carried with him only a leather case and the pale eyes of someone used to being listened to without raising his voice.

His name was never spoken in the town, but it appeared, for the first time, in ink.

In the mayor’s office, beneath a heap of scribbled requests and falsified reports, lay a new letter from the provincial director. It was short. It said only:

We expect Commissioner Nikolai Ludin to reach your district within the fortnight. He is traveling without retinue and requires no escort. You are not to be informed of his day of arrival. Treat this matter with discretion and humility. Ensure all is in order.

Mayor Ivan Mirov read it three times.

He folded it, then unfolded it, then folded it again, and sat with his hands pressed to his forehead like a man trying to hold in a scream.

Across the room, the assistant stared silently, his pencil hovering above a blank page.

Mirov looked up at last. His face had gone the color of cold wax.

“We must,” he said, “keep our guest comfortable.”

The assistant nodded slowly. “You mean Alan.”

“I mean,” the mayor whispered, “that if he is not the Commissioner, then we must make him one. Publicly. Grandly. Until the real one passes us by without suspicion.”

“And if he doesn’t pass?”

Mirov stared at the empty teacup on his desk. “Then we pray he enjoys a well-prepared stage.”

Outside, the town bustled with false improvement — lamps cleaned twice daily, sick hidden indoors, the scent of paint and panic in every corner.

And miles away, the real Commissioner leaned back in his seat, watching crows circle a field of withered grain.

The Lovers and the Ledger

The daughter's eyes had grown softer, her questions deeper, and her touch lingered longer on his arm when they passed through the garden. Yet it was the wife — Natalia — whose presence now moved like shadow across his thoughts, never resting, never asking, yet always watching.

He found himself drifting between them, one offering youth and hope, the other danger and knowing. Kira wrote Alan short notes folded like secrets, asking what he dreamed of, whether he'd ever seen the sea from a foreign palace, whether he truly believed in fate. He answered with half-poems and phrases stolen from forgotten books, enough to keep her heart fluttering and her mind clouded.

But Natalia did not write. She simply appeared — in the hallways, in doorways, brushing past him with the faintest smile and eyes that said, *I already know everything you've said to her.*

At supper, she let her fingers graze the stem of her glass in silence while Kira leaned in, laughing at something Alan had made up that morning. When he glanced at Natalia, she didn't look away. She merely raised one brow, daring him.

Then there were the nights. Some he spent whispering beneath the lilacs with Kira, pretending he'd never loved before. Others ended in the drawing room, sitting opposite Natalia as the candles burned low and the house fell into uneasy sleep. She never asked questions. She just spoke in layers, testing the edges of his performance.

"I suppose," she said once, eyes fixed on the dying flame, "a man who belongs nowhere becomes quite good at making every place his stage."

Alan had no answer. He only drank deeper.

He told himself he could balance them — charm one, outwit the other, extract advantage from both. But something in the weight of their presence began to press against him. Their footsteps, their voices, their unspoken rivalry. One a mirror of what he claimed to be; the other, a mirror of what he feared he was becoming.

And somewhere in the pocket of his coat, folded and untouched, lay a letter from his brother — unopened. His world was tilting, from entanglement.

The mayor's house blazed with borrowed grandeur that evening. Candles flickered in every window, silverware had been scoured until the patterns wore thin, and a dozen mismatched

chairs were arranged around a table stretched too long for the room. The guests — local merchants, minor officials, and their overdressed wives — spoke in hushed awe of the honored guest as they awaited him, each clutching a glass, none brave enough to ask what exactly he did.

Alan arrived late, of course, stepping in with the smooth delay of a man who controls his own time. He wore a borrowed cravat tied carelessly, like someone too accustomed to formality to care for it anymore. Kira beamed at him from across the table. Natalia, at the mayor's side, offered nothing but a slow blink.

After the soup — lukewarm and oversalted — and the goose — undercooked and overpraised — the mayor rose, clinked his glass, and gave a shaky introduction filled with vague compliments and misquoted Latin.

Alan stood slowly when it was his turn. The table quieted at once. Even the maids paused at the doorways.

He didn't thank anyone. He didn't need to. He simply placed one hand on the back of his chair, looked over the candlelight, and began.

"Reform," he said, "is not a matter of laws. It is a matter of posture."

He let the word hang, watching the confusion settle like dust.

"You can change charters, rename ministries, shuffle titles like cards," he went on, "but if the men beneath them still bow the wrong way, nothing changes. True reform begins with the spine — not the ink."

The judge blinked. The school director nodded vaguely. One merchant whispered to his wife, "What did he say?"

Alan leaned forward slightly. "Do you know what I found in Petersburg? A man — a janitor, mind you — who stood straighter than the minister whose office he cleaned. That man understood reform better than anyone in the government."

He paused just long enough, then smiled faintly. "So I offered him a post."

No one dared ask what kind. They only murmured in admiration.

"Titles," Alan continued, "are like lanterns. They light nothing unless someone stands beneath them."

He raised his glass.

"To standing."

"To standing," the guests echoed — some too eagerly, others only halfway through understanding.

He sat down as though he hadn't just spoken in riddles. The table erupted in praise, the mayor clapping loudly, the judge muttering about applying the philosophy to court sessions.

Kira's eyes shone with wonder.

Natalia's lips curved into something colder.

And Alan — Alan reclined slightly in his chair, swirling the wine in his glass with one hand, his other resting on the table like it belonged there. The room now danced to his rhythm, nodding to the melody of a song they didn't know, afraid to be the first to admit they hadn't heard the tune.

That, he thought, was power.

The air inside the town hall's records room always carried the dry scent of parchment and mice — a quiet corner of bureaucracy where secrets were kept mostly by dust. Alan wandered through it one afternoon, summoned by the mayor to "review documentation," which really meant: let them be seen showing him things they didn't want him to see.

He moved slowly past shelves sagging with ledgers, running his gloved hand over the spines as if he could read by touch alone. Behind him trailed two clerks and a junior deputy who had been instructed to "act natural," and thus behaved like furniture in mid-collapse.

That was when one of the clerks — a pale, jittery man with watery eyes and a crooked collar — looked up from a drawer and froze.

Alan saw it. The slight widening of the eyes, the breath caught half-swallowed, the way the man leaned ever so slightly backward, like prey recognizing the outline of a predator it had once escaped.

They had met before. Not in this town, no. Somewhere smaller, older, unremembered by most. But the look was unmistakable — recognition without welcome.

Alan smiled softly. He turned fully, stepping closer, and the others, sensing nothing, continued bumbling through false explanations.

"You look unwell," Alan said quietly, his voice carrying just enough weight to cut through the silence.

The clerk swallowed. "I—I thought…"

"You thought I resembled someone?" Alan asked, his tone as pleasant as warm milk.

The man nodded, eyes darting.

Alan stepped closer, adjusting the cuff of his sleeve. "It's common. Faces repeat themselves. Especially among men who read too much."

The clerk opened his mouth to speak — or confess, or flee — but Alan's smile sharpened just enough.

“I’d hate to think,” he murmured, “that a diligent servant of the town might mistake identity and speak aloud in error. There are costs to confusion, you see. Even legal ones. And you work with records, yes? You know how thin the margin is between clerical misstep… and falsification.”

The man nodded too quickly, sweat already collecting at his temples.

Alan leaned in, voice lower now.

“Your safest course,” he said, “is silence. For your sake.

The clerk’s eyes widened further. But fear doesn’t wait for logic.

Alan clapped him gently on the shoulder and turned back to the others, who were still explaining grain taxes and fictitious committees.

“Carry on,” he said lightly. “The ledgers are in excellent condition.”

Behind him, the clerk sat down slowly, hands trembling, breath shallow — saying nothing.

Because in a town already ruled by whispers and shadows, the loudest voice was often the one that never raised above a murmur.

The book was massive — bound in cracked leather, its pages browned at the edges and swollen from humidity and handling. They laid it out before him in the mayor’s office like a sacred text, opening it carefully, reverently, as if the truth might escape if turned too quickly.

Mayor Mirov stood behind the desk, wringing his hands in silence, while two clerks flanked him, each armed with a nervous smile and a thumb strategically placed to hold down pages they preferred he not read.

“This,” Mirov said, “is the town’s financial ledger — our lifeblood, so to speak. You’ll find we are... quite efficient.”

Alan leaned over the book with exaggerated interest, nodding slowly as his eyes passed over numbers that didn’t add up, dates that looped backward, and line items that read more like coded bribes than budget allocations.

He didn’t laugh. He didn’t even smirk. Instead, he clicked his tongue thoughtfully.

“Remarkable,” he said. “Truly.”

“Remarkable?” the mayor echoed, uncertain.

Alan straightened, placing one hand on the open book.

“Yes. This level of creative accounting requires vision. It’s not easy to create a structure so... fluid, and yet maintain the illusion of order.”

Mirov glanced at the clerks, unsure whether to be insulted or flattered.

“You’ve managed,” Alan continued, “to craft a document that answers every question without providing a single truth. That is not mismanagement — that is artistry.”

The mayor exhaled as if being knighted.

Alan’s eyes, meanwhile, had drifted to a folded slip of parchment tucked loosely between two pages. It was unsigned, unsealed — just crammed hastily into the ledger’s belly, nearly falling out. He glanced at it briefly: a list of names beside small sums, amounts too regular, too neat. It smelled of payoffs. Or silence.

Without pause, without drawing attention, Alan let one hand drift over it, fingers curling, folding the page gently into his palm as he nodded along to the mayor’s proud mumblings.

He closed the ledger himself, patting the cover with quiet approval.

“This,” he said, slipping the folded paper into the inner lining of his coat, “proves what I suspected all along — the town is in the hands of men who understand balance.”

“Balance,” the mayor echoed again, his voice less firm.

“Yes,” Alan said, already turning away. “That fine line between collapse and continuity.”

He left the office with slow, confident steps, nodding to each clerk like a general inspecting troops. None noticed the thin slip of paper now pressed flat against his chest — the one piece of truth the town had not meant to show.

It started as a ripple in the corner of the day — a glance that lingered a breath too long, a shuffle of footsteps that ended before they began, the faint click of a door across the courtyard that had no reason to open. Alan dismissed it at first, chalking it to nerves, or perhaps the lingering aftertaste of too many performances layered atop one another.

But it returned.

At the marketplace, while bartering with nothing in his pocket, he caught sight of a figure across the square — not close, not even suspicious, just... still. A man leaning on a stick who seemed to vanish when Alan turned again. At the mayor’s house, he heard whispers cut off when he entered. The staff’s smiles had grown narrower. Even Ferdinand’s silence seemed tauter, as if some unspoken weight pressed on his tongue.

That evening, alone in his room, he checked the lock twice. Then once more.

He paced. Lit a candle. Snuffed it. Opened the window and stared out at the street below. It was quiet. Too quiet for a town that gossiped so easily.

A floorboard creaked — not in his room, but beyond it. In the hallway. Alan stood still, listening. The sound did not return. He waited. Nothing.

He walked to the mirror and stared at himself, as if the man behind the glass might crack first. The brass ring on his finger caught the candlelight, duller than usual. He turned it slowly.

“I see you,” he whispered to no one, to someone.

He opened his coat, checked the stolen paper again. Still there. Safe.

And yet, something had shifted. The air felt heavier, the eyes he met in the street more curious than admiring. He had built himself a pedestal from their fear, but now, it seemed, someone was circling the base — measuring it, tapping the wood.

He did not sleep that night. He told himself he didn’t need to. But his eyes remained fixed on the door until morning, waiting for the knock that didn’t come.

Not yet.

Looming Truth

The air in town had changed. Not suddenly, not in any way that could be pointed to, but like a current running just beneath the skin. People spoke in shorter sentences. Doors were opened with more caution, closed with more finality. Even the wind seemed to carry whispers rather than leaves.

The rumor came not as a shout, but as a ripple.

First, the baker’s son returned from the outer farms and said a coach had passed him — “not noble, but clean. Official-looking.” Then the postmaster mentioned, quite casually, that a letter bearing an unmarked wax seal had arrived from the capital and was collected by a man he didn’t recognize. Finally, a merchant from the next district claimed the Commissioner — the real Commissioner — had been spotted two towns east, traveling alone, “quiet as a priest.”

Mayor Mirov said nothing publicly, but his color began to drain by the hour. He sat more heavily in his chair, snapped more quickly at the clerks, and took to locking his study door even while inside it.

Alan, meanwhile, began to feel the pressure not as a threat but as a thinning in the atmosphere. His performances continued — dinners, strolls, speeches — but there were cracks. Moments where he forgot a name he’d invented, referenced a conversation he’d never had, promised a man a position he’d already given to someone else the day before.

At the town hall, when asked about his role in a “regional oversight committee” he had invented weeks earlier, he blinked too long before answering.

“It’s under revision,” he said, waving it off. “Merged with the security initiative.”

“The what?”

“The... infrastructure branch. Interlinked protocols.”

The official nodded — slowly — not convinced, but too afraid to ask again.

Late that evening, back in the inn, he sat at the writing desk, a blank page before him, pen in hand. He tried to compose another letter to his brother — another request, another excuse. But the words would not come. They clashed in his head, all speaking at once.

“Who am I today?” he muttered to himself, the ink drying on the tip of the pen. “Who did I say I was?”

Behind him, the floor creaked. He turned quickly.

No one.

Only the sound of the wind pressing against the window.

But even that wind carried a different tone now — not suspicion, but certainty, approaching step by step.

It happened during a gathering meant to be small — just a few men of title, seated in the mayor’s drawing room over glasses of port and brittle toast. But among them was Lev Andreyev, a landowner from the next district, old, hard-eyed, and famously immune to the kind of charm that fluttered most courtiers into silence.

Alan had been leaning into his persona more heavily that week, tilting his chin higher, drawing out his pauses, letting sentences trail into mystery. He spoke of diplomatic papers, border agreements, investments tied to northern coal. He sipped his drink slowly, letting his ring catch the candlelight, a glint he used like punctuation.

But Andreyev watched with the stillness of a hawk.

“Fascinating,” he said at last. “And what exactly is your role in the foreign intelligence ministry? I believe you said you had reviewed canal treaties last month?”

Alan smiled thinly. “Oversight, naturally. I’m not permitted to speak freely on those matters, of course.”

“Of course,” said Andreyev. “But surely you can mention which treaty. Constantinople or Trieste?”

Alan paused. He had never mentioned a city.

“Both,” he said quickly. “Joint protocols were being drafted. It’s confidential.”

Andreyev’s eyes narrowed just slightly. “Joint protocols between rival states? That would be a miracle. Or a mistake.”

Alan leaned forward, changing tactics.

“Forgive me,” he said, voice suddenly sharper. “I assumed you were familiar with the methods of modern diplomacy. I didn’t realize I’d have to explain the basics.”

A hush fell over the room, the other guests pretending to examine their drinks.

Andreyev gave a cold smile. “No need to explain. I always enjoy fiction. But I do wonder — in what language were these treaties drafted? Surely not Ottoman Turkish?”

“Of course not,” Alan snapped. “French, as all civilized documents are.”

Andreyev nodded slowly. “I see. Because last week I attended a treaty discussion in Petrograd. The subject? Trieste. They spoke Russian throughout. No mention of your name, I’m afraid.”

Alan’s smile tightened. “Then perhaps you weren’t meant to hear it.”

A silence deeper than protocol settled over the room.

Andreyev stood. He bowed slightly toward the mayor, ignoring Alan altogether.

“I’ll be taking my leave,” he said. “Some guests don’t require conversation — only reflection.”

The door shut behind him without another word.

Alan remained seated, one leg crossed, lips pressed in a line. No one else moved. No one dared.

Inside, he felt the first taste of what he had avoided for weeks: not exposure — not yet — but the air that comes just before it. Cold, thin, and inescapable.

It was late, the kind of hour when wine lingers too long on the breath and words grow dangerously honest. The house had gone quiet, guests departed, servants vanished into walls, and even the lamps seemed dimmer, as though they, too, were holding their breath.

Alan had remained, lounging by the hearth with a half-finished glass and his thoughts growing heavy. He didn’t hear Natalia approach until she closed the drawing room door behind her.

She stepped forward with slow confidence, her presence like smoke—unhurried, inescapable.

“I’ve been watching,” she said.

Alan didn’t rise. He only turned his head slightly. “Then you must be very entertained.”

“Entertained?” Her smile was thin. “No. But I am impressed. It’s not easy to fool a whole town. Let alone a house.”

He raised his glass. “Then let’s toast to houses built on dust.”

She ignored the gesture and moved closer, her voice lower now.

“Kira believes she loves you.”

Alan looked into the fire. “She believes in many things.”

“You’ve made her a promise. Perhaps not in words, but in posture, in silence. And that counts more to someone her age.”

He turned to face her now, eyes narrowed. “And what are you asking of me, Natalia?”

She didn’t blink.

“Marry her.”

He leaned back slightly, more amused than startled. “You’re serious?”

“Yes. If you are what you claim to be, you’d make her powerful. And if you’re not, marrying her makes you ours. We’d protect you. Keep your secret under glass.”

Alan let the idea hang, then smiled.

“And if I refuse?”

She tilted her head.

“Then marry me.”

That silenced him. For once, his mouth parted but no sound came.

Natalia moved to the edge of the firelight, her expression unreadable. “You see, Alan, power comes in many forms. You’ve tasted the performance. I offer permanence.”

“Marriage,” he said slowly, “is not a contract I take lightly.”

“You haven’t taken anything lightly since you arrived,” she said. “Except perhaps the truth.”

He stood now, not quickly. They faced each other, shadows flickering against the stone walls.

“And what do you gain, Natalia?”

She stepped even closer, her voice a breath.

“I gain exactly what I’ve always had — control. You simply... fit into it.”

He looked at her, truly looked, and for the first time since arriving, felt unsure of who was playing whom.

She turned, walked to the door, and opened it, letting the silence return like a tide.

“Consider it,” she said, not looking back. “The noose or the veil. Both will keep you here.”

Then she vanished into the corridor, leaving Alan with only the fire and the decision — one he hadn’t prepared for, and couldn’t lie his way out of.

By midnight, the wind had risen, scraping shutters and rattling the inn's windows like impatient fingers. Alan sat alone in his room, the candle burned low, the bottle almost dry. The town outside had slipped into sleep, but his mind refused to follow.

Natalia's words circled him like moths around the flame.

The noose or the veil.

He laughed — once, dryly — then poured the last of the brandy into a chipped glass. It sloshed over the rim. He didn't care. The warmth of the liquor dulled the knot in his chest, but not the thoughts behind it.

He looked at his reflection in the dark window, his blurred outline barely holding shape.

"What's one more lie?" he muttered. "A vow is just a sentence with better clothes."

The knock came soft, like a memory. Ferdinand entered without waiting.

"Someone's waiting in the alley," he said flatly. "Young. Quiet. Guessing it's the daughter."

Alan blinked, then laughed again. "Of course she is. Romance never sleeps."

"Then you'll go?"

"Eventually," Alan said. "But first…"

He reached for the mayor's fountain pen he'd borrowed days ago and pulled a scrap of parchment from the drawer. The ink bled a little, his hand unsteady, but he scrawled the words anyway.

Yes. Of course. Yes.

Then, another sheet. This time slower.

Yes.
On one condition — she never asks where I'm from.

He sealed both notes with wax and no names. He handed one to Ferdinand.

"Give this to Natalia."

Ferdinand looked at it, then back at him. "You're agreeing?"

Alan stood, wobbling slightly, his smile tilted sideways.

"To both," he said.

"You can't marry them both."

Alan clapped a hand on Ferdinand's shoulder. "That, my friend, is a problem for the morning."

He stumbled toward his coat, shoved the brass ring more tightly onto his finger, and adjusted the collar with exaggerated dignity.

“Tonight, I am a husband. Twice, if necessary.”

“You’re a drunk,” Ferdinand said.

Alan nodded, already halfway to the door.

“True. But a wanted drunk. Which is more than I was a month ago.”

And with that, he stepped out into the cold.

The next morning came slow and gray, the kind of morning that feels like a held breath. Ferdinand was already awake before the bell rang from the church tower, already pacing the muddy lane behind the inn, boots soaked, eyes sharp with something beyond anxiety. He had spoken with the postmaster. Heard the whispers. And now he moved quickly, almost running, ducking through alleys until he reached the inn’s rear stair.

He climbed two at a time, slammed the door open without knocking.

Alan was asleep across the bed, boots on, jacket twisted under him, the faint scent of wine clinging to the room like confession. The brass ring gleamed on his hand, turned sideways, half-falling off.

“Up,” Ferdinand snapped. “Now.”

Alan stirred, groaning, blinking into the morning as if light were a personal insult.

“Did I marry anyone?” he mumbled.

“No,” Ferdinand said, pulling open the shutter, “but you’re about to bury yourself.”

Alan sat up slowly. “What is it now? Another jealous father? I can apologize.”

“It’s not a father,” Ferdinand said. “It’s the Commissioner.”

That landed like a stone.

Alan blinked. “What?”

“The real one. Nikolai Ludin. He crossed into the province two days ago. I heard it from the stable hand — his coach was spotted at the toll gate before sunrise. He’s not just coming. He’s here.”

Alan swung his legs off the bed, suddenly alert but still slow, as if moving through fog.

“Maybe it’s a rumor—”

“It isn’t. The postmaster’s hands were shaking when he told me. Said the man wears no badge, no uniform. Travels alone. Carries papers with imperial seals. Silent. Watching. He passed through two towns without a word, then left with a list.”

Alan stood now, moving to the basin to splash water on his face.

“So? I’ll meet him. Say I’m part of the advance. He won’t know.”

Ferdinand stepped in front of the door.

“No. You don’t understand. He already knows. The mayor sent a letter yesterday to the governor’s office naming *you*. Calling you the Commissioner. If Ludin gets that message — if he hasn’t already...”

Alan gripped the edge of the table, breathing shallow.

“He’s not going to walk into town and accuse me outright,” he said. “That’s not how men like him work.”

“No,” Ferdinand said. “They let the lies pile so high they bury the liar with them.”

For a moment, neither spoke. Outside, a cart rolled by, its wheels creaking like distant thunder.

Ferdinand stepped closer, lowered his voice.

“We need to leave. Today. Before he gets here. You’ve stolen enough. Lied enough. We take what we have and go.”

Alan looked at the window, then down at his hands — one clutching the ring, the other still damp.

“And what happens to them?” he asked.

“Let the fools sort out their own shame. You’re not their savior, Alan. You’re barely your own.”

Alan picked up his coat, but slowly. His eyes wandered toward the chair where Kira’s scarf lay, forgotten. And then to the folded paper in his pocket — Natalia’s handwriting, sharp and slanted.

“I don’t think they’ll let me leave.”

“They won’t need to,” Ferdinand said. “Not if you choose it before they choose for you.”

For the first time since he’d stepped into the town, Alan had nothing to say.

And silence — that final absence of performance — settled over him like a curtain falling.

Chaos

Alan was a king.

He stood on a wide marble terrace draped in banners bearing his name — not one he remembered, but one that felt ancient and right. Below, crowds cheered, thousands of them, all faceless and devout. The sun gleamed against a crown that fit perfectly. He opened his mouth to speak, and even the wind stopped to listen.

Then came the sound — soft at first, but growing, folding the world inward: weeping. He turned. The throne behind him was gone. The banners burned. And the crowd was no longer cheering, only staring.

The dream broke like glass.

He woke in his narrow bed with the gray light of morning creeping across the floorboards and the cold breath of something unfinished heavy in the air.

At the door, the maid stood crying. Anastasia — the seamstress's sister, who'd once told him she didn't believe in stories. Her apron was stained with coal dust. Her eyes were wide with confusion, trembling between disbelief and fury.

"You said you'd marry me," she whispered, voice caught in the web between hurt and disbelief.

Alan sat up slowly, blinking through the throb in his head. "I didn't say—"

"You did," she interrupted, wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her dress. "You said once this was over, we'd leave. That your wife — the one in hiding — would release you. You said there was paperwork."

He swallowed. The words came back to him, distorted by drink and desire, the story he had spun like music to bend her trust.

"I said a great many things," he muttered.

"I waited," she said. "I waited while you walked with the mayor's daughter. While they whispered about you and the lady of the house. I thought I knew the difference between pretending and promise."

Alan stood, smoothing his coat, his mouth working for an answer.

"I had to," he said at last. "I needed—" but he stopped. There was no shape to give it.

Anastasia stepped backward, her hands clenched.

"You lied for money. You lied for status. And you lied for me."

He didn't argue.

“Go home, Anastasia,” he said, finally finding the tone he’d used a hundred times before — calm, dismissive, practiced. “None of this will matter tomorrow.”

But her reply came without hesitation.

“It matters now.”

Then she turned and fled down the stairs, the sound of her sobs trailing behind like the last note of a song he didn’t know he’d sung.

Alan sat back down, alone again, the crown from his dream long vanished. The sunlight had grown sharper. The room, smaller. And the silence, no longer empty — it was waiting.

By midmorning, the mayor’s carriage arrived outside the inn with far more ceremony than usual. Its wheels had been polished, the footman wore borrowed gloves, and a red ribbon had been tied absurdly to the whip. Inside, Mayor Mirov sat stiff and pale, a bundle of papers clutched in his lap, lips pursed as though he had already tasted regret.

Alan was summoned with smiles and too many compliments, brought into the town hall and guided to the council chamber where the air was thick with sweat, pride, and something just shy of desperation. A half-dozen men sat waiting — the judge, the treasurer, two landowners, and the schoolmaster, each seated like pupils awaiting their tutor.

A velvet chair had been placed at the head of the table for him. Alan hesitated only a moment before lowering himself into it.

“We’ve come to a conclusion,” Mirov began, clearing his throat three times before the words settled. “After much discussion and — ah — reflection, we feel it appropriate to formalize our relationship with your... office.”

Alan tilted his head, expression blank.

“To honor your visit, of course,” added the treasurer, his fingers nervously tapping a document. “And to invest in the future.”

“Of the province,” said the judge quickly.

Mirov laid the bundle before Alan and untied the ribbon with trembling hands. “An opportunity,” he said. “A mutual endeavor. We’ve pooled private contributions from select officials, merchants, and, ah, civic-minded citizens. A gesture of confidence in your leadership.”

Alan thumbed through the pages slowly. They were contracts in every sense but name: pledges of funds, deeds offered for temporary holding, and “anticipatory returns” on investments — all wrapped in legal language vague enough to mean anything or nothing.

They were giving him money. More than before. More than he'd imagined they had left to give.

“In exchange,” Mirov added cautiously, “we ask for your guidance in establishing a joint committee. Nothing formal. A... correspondence board. You’d chair it in name.”

“An honorary role,” said the schoolmaster, nodding as though the weight of such words might crush lesser men.

Alan folded the top page neatly, then looked around the table at the men watching him with nervous hope. They had convinced themselves of the lie fully now — not just out of fear, but out of investment. He was no longer just a visitor. He was their future.

He smiled.

“This,” he said, “is visionary.”

The judge exhaled loudly. The others followed.

“I will, of course, consider it,” Alan continued. “My current obligations are... sensitive. But your trust — your faith — is not misplaced.”

He rose, and they rose with him, like flags chasing wind.

As he stepped out of the room, portfolio in hand, he caught his reflection in the glass pane of the hall’s side door. For a moment, he didn’t recognize it. The posture was too sure, the coat too fine, the smile too real.

He turned away before it looked back.

Two days later, as the town buzzed with plans, congratulations, and whispered speculation about a new golden era under their distinguished guest, Alan stood at the top of the courthouse steps like a man accepting a crown he never wanted to return. The portfolio under his arm bulged with promises — bonds, notes, soft threats dressed as opportunities. The mayor and his council gathered below him, their faces lit with pride and the weariness of men who had given too much but couldn’t afford to regret it.

Alan raised his hand gently. The murmurs died down.

“I am honored,” he said, his voice polished, measured, sincere in all the right ways. “This town, this partnership, the faith you have placed in me — it means more than you know.”

Mirov beamed. The treasurer nodded so hard his glasses slipped down his nose.

“However,” Alan continued, folding his hands in front of him like a man preparing to carry a great burden, “I have received word of urgent business in Petersburg. Affairs requiring my attention — delicate, strategic, unavoidable.”

There was a collective hush. Only the pigeons above dared interrupt.

“Rest assured,” he went on, “this departure is not abandonment. It is preparation. I leave to secure what we’ve begun here. To build the bridges that will carry your names across the maps of the capital.”

He stepped down one stair, close enough now for them to feel the gravity in his tone.

“Trust me. As you already have.”

The mayor nodded slowly, swallowing hard. “And you will return?”

Alan smiled, wide and calm.

“Of course. This is only the beginning.”

That night, Alan dined alone. He ordered wine he didn’t drink, packed with the quiet of a thief rehearsing a retreat, and stared too long at the window, half expecting the real Commissioner to step through the glass.

He would leave at first light, before questions, before suspicion, before letters caught up.

He had taken everything — their trust, their pride, their futures. And they had handed it to him with a bow.

Now he only needed to vanish before it all came due.

The hour before dawn held a stillness peculiar to those who plan their departure in silence. Alan sat at the rickety desk of his inn room, the single candle casting long, twitching shadows across the page. His coat lay folded, bags packed, boots polished with care he hadn’t shown in weeks.

He dipped the pen into the ink with a flourish, already smiling to himself. The letter wasn’t a plea, nor a scheme — not this time. It was indulgence, pure and unfiltered. A final boast meant for an audience of one.

To: Gregor Barinov, Samara District

Dearest Brother,

I write from a position of influence so absurd it could only exist in a place like this. Imagine — a town of small minds and large pockets, all desperate to bow before a man who never once gave them his name with truth. I arrived with nothing but dust on my boots and a ring from a street peddler, and now I leave with contracts, keys, pledges, and the absurd affection of fools who call me savior.

They fawn over titles, Gregor. They kneel to accent and posture. I told them I was from the ministry, and they filled my hands with coin to protect themselves from a danger I never described. The mayor proposed I marry his daughter. His wife, too, if I’d given the right nod. They offered me half the town’s wealth for a chair I don’t even sit in.

I’m leaving now — no farewell, no ceremony. When they wake, I’ll be a memory they dare not question. They’ll explain my absence as duty, my silence as secrecy. Let them. I’ve given them exactly what they wanted: belief wrapped in eloquence.

You see, little brother, they deserve this. Not for their corruption, but for their hunger to be fooled. I merely gave them the performance they were too cowardly to doubt.

You always said I would choke on my lies one day. Perhaps. But not today. Today I leave rich.

With affection,
A.

He folded the letter with practiced ease, sealed it with wax borrowed from the mayor's desk, and placed it on the corner of the table where Ferdinand would find it and send it off.

Outside, the first light crept over the rooftops.

Alan glanced once around the room, as if expecting to find some part of himself still lingering. But it was empty. It had always been.

He placed the letter down gently, then turned to go.

The town was asleep beneath a blanket of low fog, the kind that softened sound and smothered memory. Not even the dogs barked as Alan stepped from the inn's side door, his coat buttoned tight, his bag strapped across his shoulder, and his footsteps silent on the damp cobblestones.

He didn't look back. Not at the inn. Not at the mayor's house, whose windows now held only stillness. Not at the square where, days before, he had been toasted like a prophet.

Ferdinand waited near the gate with the cart. No driver. No words. Just a lantern swinging gently from the axle, its flame a fragile star in the gray murk.

"You've got enough?" Ferdinand asked without turning.

"Enough to vanish," Alan replied.

They climbed in. The wheels turned slow at first, resisting the mud, then caught the path and rolled forward, leaving the town behind like the last line of a play no one dared applaud.

Alan kept his eyes ahead, but the lies traveled with him. In his bag were letters, stolen contracts, folded promissory notes, and a scarf he hadn't meant to take. In his coat was the ring, still on his finger, a symbol of everything he had pretended to be. Around his name, a cloud of titles that never belonged to him — and now never would again.

The town would wake soon. Some would wait by the inn for word. Others would gather at the mayor's office, demanding answers, offering silence. They would read the letter. Interpret his absence. Justify it.

But he would be gone.

Past the woods. Past the toll gate. Past the reach of shame.

The fog swallowed them.

And Alan, nestled among his stolen trophies, closed his eyes and let the cart carry him onward, away from the stage, still wearing the costume, but with no audience left to cheer.

The Real Commissioner

The sun rose late that morning, as if reluctant to shine on a town holding its breath. The streets, so recently swept in false celebration, now lay still, speckled with last night's fog and the fragments of paper left from hurried preparations. The mayor stood at his window, unmoving, eyes fixed on the gate road. Below, the square was filled — not with music or banners, but with silence.

They waited.

Merchants who had pledged money now stood in pairs, whispering calculations. Officials shifted in place, tugging at collars suddenly too tight. The council sat stiffly beneath the town hall eaves, each man glancing to the next, hoping someone else would speak first.

Kira waited at the edge of the crowd, her scarf clutched in both hands, eyes fixed on nothing. Natalia watched from the second-floor balcony, neither frowning nor smiling, only still — like a statue raised to mark a battle no one yet admitted was lost.

The town's priest arrived late, clutching his prayer book with the urgency of a man asked to bless something unnamed. Behind him, two boys carried water in a chipped basin — meant, perhaps, to wash the feet of a dignitary who had not yet appeared.

Ferdinand was gone. His absence, like Alan's, was not yet spoken of.

They waited as morning thickened into afternoon. The postmaster fidgeted with his bag, quietly informing the mayor that no new letter had come, but not saying what that meant.

And still they waited.

What had begun as ceremony was now a kind of vigil — not for honor, but for truth. And truth, as it always does when long denied, traveled slowly.

Far in the distance, past the fields, a thin shape stirred the horizon: a lone figure on horseback, moving without haste, not dressed in silk nor draped in authority — just a man, upright, deliberate, drawing closer.

No trumpets. No escort. No warning.

But some things announce themselves by absence. And the crowd felt it before they understood it.

The Commissioner was coming.

Not the one they had celebrated.

The one they had never prepared for.

The man never entered with fanfare. He passed through the gate like any traveler might—dust on his coat, a satchel at his side, his horse lean from distance. The guards didn't stop him. The postmaster didn't see him arrive. Only later did someone notice the initials stamped on the edge of his leather case: N. L.

But he asked no questions. He made no announcements. He simply walked the streets, stopping to observe, to listen. At the inn, he requested no room. At the courthouse, he did not appear. He stayed somewhere, though no one knew where. And because he said nothing, the town filled the silence with fear.

Days passed. Alan did not return.

No letter came. No word from Ferdinand. The mayor continued to smile in public, but his hands trembled each time he picked up a teacup. The council met twice daily now, though no one spoke above a whisper. The investment documents were locked away in a cabinet whose key the treasurer had not unclenched in days.

The judge reread every sentence he had ever spoken to Alan, searching for danger. The schoolmaster wrote a report he never sent. The merchants began visiting each other in private, comparing sums, seeking blame.

The townspeople grew restless. Rumors shifted daily—some claimed Alan had died nobly en route to Petersburg; others whispered he had been summoned by the Tsar himself. One boy swore he saw him boarding a riverboat with a masked woman at midnight. But none of the stories satisfied.

Kira no longer came to the square. Natalia spoke to no one.

And still the man—the quiet one, the one who had said nothing—remained in town. Always watching. Never asking.

Every day he stayed, the town grew quieter. Not in calm, but in dread. Something had been set in motion, and no one could name it, or stop it, or even say when it would begin.

But they felt it, as surely as they felt the sky before a storm.

Alan was gone.

And something worse had taken his place.

It arrived in the late afternoon, wrapped in dull paper and sealed in plain wax. No crest. No name on the envelope. The postmaster delivered it with an odd glance, as though unsure whether to hand over a letter or light a fuse.

Mayor Mirov took it without thanks. He shut the office door behind him and locked it with both bolts. The room was heavy with stillness, the air unmoving. He sat at his desk, his hands trembling slightly as he broke the seal.

The letter was brief.

To the authorities of the district,

The man known as Alan Bernstein — is not, and has never been, affiliated with any ministry, bureau, or office of the Imperial government. His name does not appear in any official registry, nor in correspondence with state officials. We confirm he was never dispatched in any capacity to your region, nor granted authority to act on behalf of any sovereign institution.

Any arrangements made with this individual are not recognized by the Crown.

Respectfully,
Commissioner-General's Office, Petersburg

Mirov read it twice. Then again.

Each word struck like a dropped stone in water — brief, simple, final.

He sat still for a long time, the paper resting lightly in his lap. Outside, the sound of a distant hammer echoed across the square — someone fixing something, unaware that nothing could be fixed now.

He finally stood, crossed to the window, and looked down at the street below. A few children ran laughing past the bakery. A man in uniform leaned against a wall, eyes half-lidded. And beyond them, across the square, in the shade of the empty stage, stood the quiet figure who had been watching all week — still, precise, unreadable.

The real Commissioner.

Mirov stepped back from the glass. His mouth was dry. His skin cold. His hands limp at his sides.

The mask had fallen. Not with shouts, nor with fury. But with a letter.

Alan was no one.

And now, everyone knew.

It began with footsteps. Not rushed, not heavy — just deliberate. They echoed down the avenue like a procession of consequence, sharp against the stone, measured as if time itself were pacing beside them.

The man — tall, lean, unadorned — crossed the square with a posture that asked for no permission. His coat was simple, his satchel worn. There were no medals. No papers displayed. But every head turned. Every conversation stilled.

Someone near the bakery dropped a loaf. A merchant abandoned his scale mid-weighing. Children were pulled from stoops. Windows shut like frightened eyes.

Inside the mayor's office, the letter still fresh in his hand, Mirov staggered from the window and began shouting for his clerk, for the treasurer, for the council — anyone. He barked orders to burn documents, hide contracts, refile ledgers. No one moved fast enough.

The judge arrived first, breathless, face pale. "Is it true?" he asked. "The letter — it was real?"

Mirov shoved it into his hands without speaking.

By the time the treasurer burst in, the mayor was already pulling papers from the drawer, stuffing them into the stove. Pages curled black and whispered into ash.

Outside, the square had transformed. People clustered along the edges, uncertain whether to stay or run. Shopkeepers closed shutters but peeked through them. The priest had emerged, holding his book with white-knuckled piety, standing at the church steps like a man about to witness a funeral.

Then the town hall doors opened. And the Commissioner entered. He said nothing.

He removed his gloves slowly, eyes scanning the room, taking in every face, every movement, every breath too shallow, every silence too long. He laid his satchel on the table.

No one greeted him. No speeches were made.

Mirov stepped forward, his hands trembling, mouth open — but no words came. The Commissioner met his gaze for only a second. Then he sat. Calm. Certain. The weight of truth had finally entered the room.

And the town — foolish, greedy, pretentious, complicit — braced itself for the sentence that would not be spoken, but simply lived.

The silence inside the council chamber was like a tomb — thick, airless, absolute. No one sat. They stood in a crooked line before the Commissioner, officials and gentry alike, as though awaiting judgment not from a man, but from time itself.

He did not address them at first. He removed a document from his satchel, unfolded it with careful hands, and placed it on the table. Then he looked up.

"You will listen."

His voice was not loud. It didn't need to be. The mayor nodded once, a motion closer to collapse than consent. The Commissioner began to read.

"It has come to the attention of the Commissioner-General's Office that one Alan Bernstein — operating under false pretenses — was received in this town as a representative of the

state. Said individual extracted money, privileges, and public trust from members of the civic and administrative bodies under fraudulent identity."

Each word landed with weight, and with every pause, the room grew colder.

"Further, it is evident that said fraud was not only permitted but enabled by a collective eagerness to suppress wrongdoing within the municipal structure, a readiness to accept flattery over verification, and an undisguised willingness to pay for silence."

The judge lowered his eyes. The treasurer swayed.

"The Office of the Commissioner-General considers this not merely a case of deception, but one of willful blindness, wherein lies were welcomed as truth for the sake of comfort and vanity."

A sound escaped someone's throat — not quite a sob, not quite a cough.

The Commissioner's eyes moved from face to face as he read the final line.

"This town, by its own hand, has revealed more than any inspection might uncover."

He folded the letter and set it down. No threat followed. No list of punishments.

They stood frozen.

The weight of exposure was worse than accusation. There was no escape, no denial, no mask left to wear.

Outside, the townspeople had gathered in silence, drawn by something they didn't yet understand — only that inside, something had ended.

And not one man in that chamber dared speak.

The Mirror

The silence stretched, brittle and bottomless. It was no longer the stillness of fear but of recognition — that low, bitter stillness which follows not punishment, but the removal of illusion.

None of them spoke. Not the mayor, not the judge, not the councilors or the landowners. The room had no sound but breath and the quiet tick of the town hall's secondhand clock, which, until now, had never seemed to keep time properly.

The Commissioner remained seated, unmoving. He did not need to speak further. The words had already done their work — the mirror had been raised, and each man saw himself within it.

Mayor Mirov stood stiffly, staring at nothing. His shoulders slumped forward under the weight of all he had hidden — the bribes disguised as kindness, the hospital's false reports, the empty titles he had clung to like driftwood. The town had not merely been fooled; he had prepared it to be fooled, taught it to obey, to bow. And in doing so, had made fools of them all.

The judge looked at his hands. He had signed half the permissions Alan had waved under their noses, never questioning their legality. The treasurer whispered a number under his breath — perhaps the sum he had given, or the debt he now owed. He had dreamed of climbing into higher circles, attaching his name to a man he thought would rise. But he hadn't chosen a man — only a shadow with a clever tongue. He had staked his dignity on a lie and watched it vanish without even a farewell.

Each of the others felt it, too — the schoolmaster, who had praised Alan's empty speeches as visionary reforms; the merchants who had boasted of connections they never understood; the priest who had prepared blessings for a title that never existed.

In that stillness, the town stood naked — not ruined, not destroyed, but finally seen.

The mayor's house was no longer a place of welcome. The curtains had been drawn tight since morning, and the staff moved with careful steps, speaking only in whispers or not at all. The sounds that had once filled the halls — laughter, footsteps, the clink of glasses — had vanished, leaving behind the dry creak of old wood and the weight of what was now known.

Kira had not come down since dawn.

After the Commissioner's words were read, she had walked silently from the council hall, her eyes wide but dry, her face unreadable. She passed through the square like a ghost, ignored the greetings of townsfolk who no longer knew how to look at her, and entered the house without a word. She had locked her door, drawn the bolt, and refused all food.

She had believed him — Alan — not only believed, but imagined a life drawn from his lies: departure to Petersburg, letters bearing her name, a promise sewn into the language of glances and flattery. Now the truth sat in her chest like a stone that would never dissolve.

Natalia did not lock herself away.

She came into the parlor like a storm that had already passed through fire. Her steps were firm, her voice low and cutting. She found her husband slumped in the armchair, coat still on, hands limp in his lap.

"Do you know what you've done?" she said.

Mirov did not answer.

She moved closer, eyes sharp as glass.

“You welcomed him. Invited him into this house. Let him touch your daughter’s hand. Let him speak lies over your table — over my table — and you smiled.”

Still, he said nothing.

“You saw what you wanted to see,” she said. “A man who could lift you out of your shame, make you forget the filth of your office, the decay in your ledger. And so you gave him everything.”

She stepped back, her voice breaking like frost underfoot.

“You sold your daughter to a ghost.”

At that, Mirov finally lifted his head.

“I didn’t know.”

“No,” she said coldly, “you didn’t want to know.”

He stood as if to reach for her, but she turned away.

“You should have listened to me,” she said. “I knew he was lying. But I let it go — because it suited me. I thought I could use him, bend him. That’s what we all did, isn’t it?”

She turned toward the hallway, pausing at the foot of the stairs.

“I curse you,” she said, without raising her voice. “Not for what you did. For what you wanted to believe.”

And with that, she vanished up the steps, her shadow falling across the wall like the closing of a curtain. The mayor stood alone in the parlor, the house too large, the silence too sharp, and no lie left to comfort him.

By midday, the town hall stood half-empty. Doors were left ajar, papers scattered across desks like the wreckage of a ship taken by calm seas after the storm. The clerks had stopped reporting for duty. The council chamber smelled of dust and old ink. The portraits of past officials on the wall seemed to watch in quiet contempt.

One by one, the men who had stood proud beside Alan — who toasted him, bribed him, promised him favors and titles — vanished.

The schoolmaster left before dawn, seen hurrying toward the station with a case under one arm and his hat in his hand. The judge was discovered in the records room, burning old letters with shaking hands before slipping out the rear door without a farewell. The treasurer was last seen speaking to a stable boy, asking how long it would take a horse to reach the next district border without stopping.

By afternoon, no one spoke of the Commissioner. No one dared utter Alan’s name. The square emptied itself as if it, too, had been shamed.

But one man didn’t leave.

Pavel, a minor official with a voice always too loud and hands too eager, stood atop the stone bridge by the western canal. He had given Alan coin and praise, called him a genius, begged for favor, and paraded his supposed friendship through the town like a badge. Now, stripped of that illusion, he paced the bridge’s edge with a vacant stare and mumbled to no one.

“The Commissioner was watching the whole time. He never said a word. Just let us act like fools. Let us hang ourselves.”

A boy passing on the bank heard him, stopped, then turned away quickly, pretending not to.

Pavel looked down at the river — gray, slow, and wide beneath the clouds. The current didn’t threaten. It only beckoned.

Moments later, the splash was hard, nearly echoed by the wind.

He was pulled from the water an hour later, soaked and silent, not breathing. They carried him to the infirmary, where the walls still bore paint fresh from the last deception.

And so the town began to crack — not with fire or riot, but with quiet departures, sudden illnesses, hurried resignations.

There were no trials, no gallows, no proclamations.

Only absence. And the long echo of their own foolishness.

The square filled one last time.

Word had spread that the mayor would speak. Not by decree, not by bell or herald, but through that slow, uncertain whisper that carries when people hunger for some end, even if it comes dressed in shame. They came from their houses, from behind shutters and thresholds, gathering beneath the gray sky as if summoned by the weight of silence itself.

Mayor Mirov stood atop the hall steps. He wore his old sash, wrinkled and sun-faded, fastened with a brass pin that caught no light. His face was drawn, his eyes sunken. He did not look like a man about to speak to his town. He looked like one already fading from it.

But still, he raised his hand, and the murmurs died.

He stood still for a moment longer.

Then, quietly, his knees buckled.

There was no drama to his fall. No cries, no flailing arms. He simply crumpled like a paper figure left out in the rain, collapsing at the foot of the stairs as the sash twisted under him and the crowd surged forward in confused stillness.

They lifted him. Nothing was spoken. There was nothing left to say.